

STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION DR. TONY BENNETT
STATE OF EDUCATION ADDRESS: “PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST”
AUGUST 23, 2010

Good evening students, parents, educators and Hoosiers. I want to thank the students and staff at Creston Middle School for hosting this event tonight. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Warren Township Superintendent Dr. Peggy Hinckley and my friend William Zhao for their kind introductions. As we gather for this inaugural State of Education address, I am already thinking about tomorrow, and I am excited to share my thoughts regarding the status and direction of Indiana education.

Tonight, we'll take a look at generations past and their efforts to educate Indiana's students better. We'll acknowledge the progress we've made. We'll identify the challenges facing this generation of Hoosier children and educators. And we'll look ahead at what it will take to overcome those challenges for this and future generations.

These are exciting times for education. Never before has a bipartisan group of national and state political leaders come together with such resolve to quickly and comprehensively reform our system of schools.

Over the past several months, prominent national figures have called education the civil rights issue of our generation, but I would go one step further.

As our state and nation continue a decades-long quest to achieve equal educational opportunities for all students, it's clear that education is not just the civil rights issue of our generation. It's the civil rights issue for every generation.

This reality has never been more evident to me than during visits to Indiana's chronically low-performing schools where many students come from low-income or minority households. While there are some exceptional educators in these schools, research tells us these students are least likely to have great teachers and leadership. But I believe all our students, especially those most vulnerable, deserve better. That's why I wake up every day thinking about how to improve the quality of instruction delivered in our classrooms and how to turnaround our lowest-achieving schools.

And while it's true we have made some progress on these issues, there is much work to be done before all children have the opportunities they need to lead us into a bright future. The bottom line is this: we have to do what's right for kids. Academic excellence can and should be the norm for our children—not the exception. And achieving excellence means we must first set high expectations.

In the last year and a half, we've raised the bar for student achievement and endorsed a statewide culture of academic excellence. It's a culture that expects at least 90% of students to pass both English/language arts and math portions of ISTEP+ exams and End-of-Course Assessments; a culture where 25% of graduates receive a passing score on at least one Advanced Placement or International

Baccalaureate exam, or receive college credit during high school; and a culture where we expect no less than 90% of students to graduate on time from high school on time and ready for college or careers.

During my time as superintendent, two things have become clear. First, there's no more room for excuses; the stakes are too high to continue putting adult interests ahead of our children's needs. Second, our students have shown they will meet, and even exceed, the high expectations we set for them.

As schools work to provide more rigorous instruction, our students are making impressive gains. This year, as we double down on our efforts for Indiana's children, we have to ask whether an educational system created decades ago is the most effective means to deliver instruction to children of the digital age. And we must act now to open all doors to equal educational opportunities.

Others have gone before us and taken up this worthy cause. Twenty-three years ago, with bipartisan support, Gov. Bob Orr and Superintendent H. Dean Evans crafted an education reform package known as A+. They noted our changing economy and insisted our schools must change to keep pace.

The A+ goals mirror our current efforts: Increase student achievement. Require accountability. Promote excellence in teaching and school leadership. Create more and better educational opportunities. And fund schools more effectively. The A+ plan was considered bold for its time. Many of the proposals were dismissed as too much too fast—and those that were implemented were shamefully eroded over time. But we have another chance today, and it's time we put students first and implement needed reforms on their behalf.

Make no mistake. We face challenges.

But as we confront an uncertain and rapidly changing American economy, we must accept that more money is not the answer to the problems that challenge Indiana's schools. In fact, student achievement has been stagnant even though school spending has doubled since the 1970s.

Indiana's schools are in better shape than many states across the country that have cut education funding by as much as 18 percent. After increasing school funding by \$2.7 billion between 1995 and 2009, Indiana's schools saw only a modest decrease last year because Governor Mitch Daniels and state legislators made funding education a top priority.

While this economic recession has impacted most functions of government, it has also given local school leaders an opportunity to reconsider the way they do business.

Most schools are responding with a students-first attitude, and I'm encouraged by examples I have seen around the state. I have never seen schools compete so aggressively to attract students. Several districts are advertising student performance and academic offerings to encourage families to transfer into their schools. In LaPorte County, South Central Community Schools Superintendent Christopher

Smith sends his school buses into other districts—at no cost to families—to pick up students who transfer to his schools.

Others, like Evansville Vanderburgh County Schools, are consolidating programs and streamlining their purchasing practices. Fort Wayne Community Schools outsourced custodial services to realize \$4.4 million in annual savings. That's enough to cover at least 80 teaching jobs.

Corporations in New Harmony, Portage and Knightstown switched to the state's health care plan. Portage schools, for example, saved more than \$1 million and 20 instructional jobs. A recent report noted that if more corporations made the move, schools statewide could save at least \$450 million annually.

Equally impressive are the teachers and administrators giving up pay raises and benefits. Schools in Elkhart, Fishers, Highland, Huntington and many others have made these selfless moves to put students first.

Instead of trying to figure out how to get more money for education, schools across the state are figuring out how to get more education for our money. We should all follow their examples. And while we're at it, we must channel the resources we do have directly to student learning.

And, if you need more proof that money isn't the answer to improving our schools, consider this: during 14 consecutive years of funding increases, academic gains were small. Now, when money is tight, our students have seen some of the biggest improvements in the state's history.

For example, we increased high school graduation by 3.7 percent, and we increased participation in dual credit and advanced placement coursework. I want to highlight Principal Eric Ban's success in this area. Dr. Ban worked with state universities to provide students more affordable access to dual-credit opportunities, and the results have been remarkable. Last year, 64 percent of Crown Point High School graduates earned dual or advanced placement credit.

To this end, I will continue to work with Commissioner Teresa Lubbers and the Commission for Higher Education to change the dual credit and dual enrollment policies to reflect a student-focused approach.

I'm also incredibly proud of Indiana's students for their performance on this year's ISTEP. They attained one of the largest-ever increases in ISTEP scores across all grade levels and subject areas.

Across the board—in urban and rural schools, and in high-poverty and high-minority schools—our students performed better. Some far exceeded our high expectations. Students and teachers here in Warren Township gained eight percent on both the English/language arts and math portions of the ISTEP. Two Warren Township schools in particular, Sunny Heights and Brookview Elementary, reduced the achievement gap between black and white students by over 15% in students passing both English/language arts and math.

And I have to mention Carrie Gosch Elementary School in East Chicago—a Title I school where nearly 100% of students qualify for free lunch and come from minority households. This school realized a 32% jump in students passing the ISTEP. They did this by making instruction personal and by investing more time. Teachers came in on Saturdays to offer additional help to students who needed it most. These great educators remind us: if we put students first, every child can learn.

At Woodland Elementary in Lafayette, Mr. Bruce Hull led his teachers and students to close the achievement gap by 37%. Principal Hull credits his students, strategic planning efforts, and his staff's overall awareness level that all children can and deserve to achieve. I hope you will join me in celebrating these successes.

In just 19 months, Indiana has distinguished itself as a national leader in education reform by implementing an aggressive, student-focused agenda.

To ensure our students are held to the highest academic standard, Indiana joined a consortium of states and adopted the Common Core State Standards. In today's world where so many students move across district and even state lines each year, it makes sense to have a common set of thorough standards to prepare students across the country with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and careers.

These common standards will serve as guidelines for success, and it will be up to our outstanding educators to decide how to best deliver instruction. To aid teachers in their planning, the Indiana Department of Education has developed new tools to help teachers sequence instruction in order to ensure students master essential skills.

As we offer new supports to Indiana's teachers, we have also kept a watchful eye on how to achieve better outcomes for children. Therefore, we improved the way we license teachers in Indiana.

Our new teacher licensing rules require educators to master the subjects they teach and make it easier for career changers to enter the teaching profession—thereby expanding the pool of talented people who serve our students.

The new rules reduce the financial burden on teachers, who can now forgo costly college coursework to renew their licenses. They can also add subject-area certification more cost effectively by demonstrating competence on rigorous exams. So far, more than 600 teachers have added specialty areas to their licenses under our new rules.

Adopting the Common Core State Standards also created the opportunity to take teacher licensure in Indiana to the next level by establishing rigorous teacher education standards. This effort will make Indiana the first state in the nation to align educator preparation with the Common Core. We know teachers make the biggest difference in students' success, and these new teacher standards will lead to improved achievement for all Indiana students.

Some reforms can only happen with decisive action by Indiana's General Assembly.

And I want to recognize state legislators who joined us to implement strong reforms, like providing teachers immunity from lawsuits for using reasonable discipline to maintain classroom order. They also took a firm stand against social promotion to make sure all students have the ability to read by the time they complete third grade. To achieve that goal, the Indiana Department of Education is working closely with “Opportunity Schools” to implement a new world-class reading framework that will soon expand statewide.

Next, we’ve taken care to implement strong accountability measures to match our strong reforms. And for accountability to be effective, we know it must be fair, transparent and easy to understand.

To increase transparency, we are changing the names of unclear, confusing state accountability categories like “Academic Progress,” and “Academic Probation.” Beginning in 2011, we will grade our schools the same way we grade our students—A through F. Everyone knows what letter grades mean, so parents and other concerned citizens will be able to both celebrate school success and hold schools accountable.

This new system allows a great school to be recognized. Likewise, if a school is failing, parents will know and will demand more for their children. When we achieve that level of transparency, healthy competition will lead to better approaches that will benefit all students.

Keep in mind, Indiana’s accountability law is finally being put to the test—11 years after it became law. Our state’s chronically underperforming schools have been identified, and those schools are charged with implementing transformational change to offer students the quality instruction they deserve. And I say it’s about time.

Too many years passed while our most vulnerable students were silently condemned to these schools without recourse while hundreds of millions of hard-earned taxpayer dollars were spent on minimal results. These students must not be forgotten, and that’s why I promise to aggressively pursue reforms in these schools.

I have met individually with leadership in each of the ten corporations that are home to these lowest-achieving schools. In some cases, numbers like 60% and 75% were used by administrators to describe the percentage of ineffective teachers in those schools. More shocking to me is that some building administrators have failed to conduct rigorous annual evaluations to identify ineffective teachers or they have failed to take appropriate actions when teachers are found ineffective. My duty as superintendent is to recommend any and all steps necessary to turn these distressed schools around for the students. To address this issue, we will bring aggressive proposals to the General Assembly in the months ahead.

Our biggest accomplishment in the eyes of many educators and parents is the Indiana Growth Model. It’s the game-changer for education in our state, and it underlies many of our initiatives. It lets us look beyond test scores to examine how much students actually learn in a school year.

The model is based on the fundamental belief that *all children*—regardless of their achievement upon entering a classroom—are entitled to *at least* one year of growth from one year of instruction. Whether students are high ability, English language learners, minorities, enrolled in special education, or low-income, they deserve to grow alongside their academic peers. No more excuses.

To that end, the Growth Model will drive our efforts to close the achievement gap. Under the old pass/did not pass system, many educators focused on those students just beneath the passing bar, because teacher and school success was measured by how many students passed the test. With the Growth Model, teachers will get credit for helping all students achieve a year's growth in a year's time – even if some students are still unable to pass the ISTEP.

Besides measuring student improvement year over year, the Growth Model also serves as the foundation for three necessary initiatives: (1) it provides a framework for a fair and rigorous system of annual teacher and administrator evaluations; (2) it enables us to implement performance-based decision-making inside our schools; and (3) it allows us to create fair and appropriate metrics for assigning A-F letter grades to Indiana's schools.

Indiana's Growth Model ushers in a new era of transparency. Soon, teachers and parents of students in grades 3 through 8 will have access to the most current student growth data on a website called the Learning Connection. That means teachers can review student growth history and parents can start asking important questions about their child's academic growth.

By next fall, parents will be able to see the growth history for their child's teacher so they will know how successful that adult has been in helping students grow academically. What a powerful tool for parents! I encourage all teachers and parents to reach out to school administrators to get Learning Connection access today.

Indiana's recent accomplishments have created momentum to propel us forward.

Now, because our students deserve it, we are prepared to close the door on a system that too often perpetuates the status quo. We must close the door on a system that allows 23,000 Hoosier students to drop out of high school each year. We must close the door on a system in which 25,000 third graders cannot read at grade level. And we must close the door on a system that accepts excuses for a persistent achievement gap. This means we must do more than tinker with "business as usual."

Today, twice as many black and Hispanic students fail to graduate from high school compared to their white peers. In Grade 3, over 20 percent more white students pass the English/language arts portion of the ISTEP than do black students, and by Grade 8, the gap widens to 30 percent. Think about that. Over time, the students who need to grow the most to catch up to their academic peers actually learn less the longer they're in our classrooms. Imagine how that factor is intensified for the over 170,000 students attending chronically underperforming schools.

Educators who use data to drive individualized instruction will be able to put an end to this downward trend that allows the achievement gap to persist. Teachers and leaders in schools like Sunny Heights, Brookview, Carrie Gosch and Woodland are doing that already, and their students are benefitting from those efforts. Indiana's Growth Model is available to all schools at no cost, and I hope schools will begin using that data right away.

To give every student the best chance for success, we must offer families an array of outstanding educational opportunities, including virtual, hybrid, project-based learning, and other innovative school models. Children should not be forced to conform to the environment at the school they are "supposed to" attend based on their ZIP Code. We must make sure all families—no matter their address, income, or skin color—have great options for their children.

Options like the Charles A. Tindley Accelerated School here in Indianapolis, where a majority of students come from low-income and/or minority households. Tindley's energetic principal, Marcus Robinson, and his staff have high expectations for every student, and they're seeing results. It is a school with rigorous standards, a no excuses culture, and a committed leader who holds everyone, including himself, accountable. Tindley students commit to a longer school day and a longer school year. For their efforts, they earn two years of college credit with no tuition cost. If we give students like those at Tindley real options, they will choose success and graduate well prepared for a successful future.

The onus must be on schools to meet the needs of their customers: the students. William, I will act with your fierce urgency, and I will exercise my authority as superintendent to ensure those students most marginalized by society receive the education required for success. I will collaborate with other government leaders to ensure another generation isn't lost in failing schools. No proposal, built on facts and created for the benefit of students, should be considered too radical to solve this problem.

As parents, we must actively participate in our children's educational process.

We must be unapologetic advocates for our children's best interests. But we also must take responsibility for their attendance, preparation and commitment to learn. To more deeply engage parents and families, the Indiana Department of Education has borrowed an idea from one of Indiana's outstanding principals—Steve Baker at Bluffton High School.

On the first day of school each year, Mr. Baker's freshmen sign a school banner signifying their pledge to graduate in four years. When students fall behind, he reminds them of their pledge and works with students and parents to get them back on track for graduation. Ninety-three percent of Bluffton High School students graduate from high school in four years. Mr. Baker sets high expectations for his students.

Like Principal Baker, the Indiana Department of Education has high expectations for the families of Indiana's school children. In partnership with the Indiana Parent Teacher Association, we are asking parents to commit to their child's academic achievement by signing a pledge. And thanks to a teacher's

suggestion, we are encouraging all teachers to promote this pledge. We know a simple written commitment can be a powerful driving force, and we hope all parents will commit to helping their children achieve a year's worth of growth during the 2010-11 school year.

More than any other reform, however, we must focus our efforts on the only factors proven to make a BIG impact on student achievement: great teachers and great school leadership.

Recently, President Obama said, "The single most important factor in determining student achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from. It's not who their parents are or how much money they have. It's who their teacher is."

At the same time, we know having a high quality teacher four years in a row is enough to close the achievement gap. And we are lucky to have many excellent educators in our schools, like this year's Teacher of the Year, Byron Earnest. But frankly, it's amazing we have as many as we do—considering we don't do nearly enough to promote and reward excellence among our best teachers and administrators.

Currently, we only reward teachers based on the years they teach and the degrees they hold—two factors research has shown have nothing to do with teacher effectiveness or student success. Equally disturbing is this: our system doesn't allow school leaders to make the types of staffing decisions that will benefit students. As a result, many of our most enthusiastic and effective teachers find themselves wondering if they are secure in their jobs—regardless of their performance in the classroom—just because they have fewer years of classroom experience.

If we're going to hold teachers accountable for teaching our kids—if we're going to hold leaders accountable for school success—we have to make student learning the primary consideration for teacher promotion and recognition.

To do that, we must have a meaningful system for evaluating teachers and building administrators—one that makes year-to-year growth in student achievement the most important factor in determining effectiveness. Once we have a consistent and fair way to evaluate educators, we should use those evaluations to reward, remediate and even remove teachers as appropriate. For this reason, our legislative agenda will be aimed at recognizing and rewarding Indiana's great teachers and school leaders.

Some people tell me these ideas are controversial. They say I'm asking for too much, too fast. But I can't help but wonder, what's so bold about making student learning the primary objective in our schools? Why is it radical to suggest school leaders and teachers should undergo rigorous annual evaluations to ensure student learning is our highest priority? Common sense and research tell us we must measure results to determine effectiveness, and from there, we can make the changes needed to improve. This is a big issue. It's going to require big thinking and bold proposals to transform educator accountability. Make no mistake—small changes won't cut it.

To drive these changes, I've assembled a group of top-notch teachers to serve on Indiana's first Education Reform Cabinet. They are here tonight as my special guests, and I commend them for committing to lead reform efforts in schools and communities across the state on behalf of Indiana's children.

I've been pleased to see more and more people embrace our ambitious reform proposals which are gaining traction as a result of bipartisan promotion nationwide. Some of this acceptance is due to increased transparency and discussion, as well as the fact our proposals are in line with those being considered at the national level.

I also believe more people are coming around because we've been here before, and now we can see the results of our failure to seize past opportunities to do the right thing. And tonight I'm hopeful you will all join me in demanding more for Indiana's children.

In just 19 months, our students have made impressive gains. We will not stall now. We must step on the gas and continue to implement reforms that put children first.

Tonight's discussion leads us to this question: "What is best for our students?" If we are to be successful, this question must guide us as we make all our decisions. It won't be easy. There will be fierce opposition from defenders of the status quo to match our fierce urgency for change.

With that in mind, I want to leave you with a few words from one of America's greatest civil rights leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

*Cowardice asks the question, is it safe?
Expediency asks the question, is it polite?
Vanity asks the question, is it popular?
But conscience asks the question, is it right?
And there comes a time when one must take a position that is
Neither safe nor polite nor popular
But one must take it, because it is right!*

We are raising expectations for every Indiana student because it's the right thing to do. We are saying no to tired excuses because saying no is the right thing to do.

We are increasing transparency within the system because it's the right thing to do. We are holding adults accountable for our students' educational outcomes because it's the right thing to do.

In short, we are putting students first because it's the right thing to do. By having the courage to do what is right—instead of what might be safe, polite or popular—we are opening doors to educational opportunity for all students.

Again, I thank you for joining me for this inaugural event for Indiana education. We can't afford to miss this historic opportunity. God bless our students, our families, our great educators, and our state, as we endeavor to improve our schools for all children. Thank you.